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ABSTRACT

A number of reasons could no doubt be found for why the study of communication has been so fragmented over the years. R. Blanchard and W. Christ have indicated that when mass communication courses were first developed, those courses were generally located in departments "offering vocationally based instruction." Speech communication and mass media have remained split along these lines. However, it makes sense that the two should come together in one department. Theoretically, they are very similar areas of study, as both are concerned with the same basic concepts: channels, structure, symbols, feedback, credibility, listening, control mechanisms, and ethics. Practically, they both fare better in the university environment today. Turf wars between the various subdisciplines of communication expose the discipline as a whole to charges of not fitting in with other traditional liberal arts studies. As mass media and speech communication departments have been the target of massive cuts recently, a consolidation could benefit both. But when a consolidation occurs, it is essential that the same courses now offered are not simply relisted under a new department heading. While some courses would remain unchanged, both an introductory and a capstone course should bring students studying the various branches of the communication field together. The time for reform is now; the key to success is a clear statement of defense defining communication study as necessary to the university and society as a whole. (Contains 17 references.) (TB)

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Affirming Commonalities -- Curriculum Directions to Support the Study of All Contexts of Communication

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The university community would be puzzled, indeed, if the study of history were segmented into separate departments such as American history, European history, medieval history and so on. It would be startling because the methods and key concepts of studying history in each of these realms are more similar than they are different. And it would be unusual to see a university with separate music departments for each string, brass, and choral music. Or how about separate departments for micro and macro economics. These unusual separations would no doubt confuse the administration and faculty across campus, because it would appear artificial forces were at work to keep seemingly similar content areas and processes of study apart. But that is still the essence of the matter in many institutions today where the study of communication is sectioned off into various subdivisions.

The main divisions are between traditional speech communication and mass communication, but with a variety of other departmental fences labeled broadcasting, radio-TV-film, journalism, public relations, and even interpersonal communication, speech communication, and rhetorical studies. No doubt, these artificial separations cause the academic community no small amount of confusion. That is certainly not healthy for the faculty and students of communication study, especially in an era of academic scrutiny and accountability, not to mention economic downsizing.

This paper will attempt first to understand how the study of communication came to be splintered in many universities. It will also look at the untidy nature of this situation and the harm of such arrangements to the discipline. More important, however, the paper seeks to establish a rationale for overcoming these impractical and illogical separations by focusing on the key concepts that should be driving a merger of the study of various communication contexts into one program area.

The growth of unhealthy distinctions

A number of reasons could no doubt be found for why the study of communication has been so fragmented over the years. Blanchard and Christ have indicated that when mass communication courses were first developed, those courses were generally located in departments "offering vocationally based instruction" (Blanchard and Christ, p. 36). This lead to mass communication curricula being structured according to specific occupations such as journalism and advertising, or particular delivery systems such as radio, television, newspapers, and so on (Blanchard and Christ, p. 36-38). The pressure of the professional journalism/media world surely played no small part in creating this vocational agenda for the study of mass communication.

It is little wonder, then, that traditional speech communication programs, based on their long efforts to be considered part of an institution's liberal arts mission, would have little interest in taking on the potential baggage of media

study's apparent vocationalism. So while the study of public speaking and rhetoric evolved into speech communication programs by adding the emerging areas of study such as interpersonal and organizational communication, mass media study was left to its own vocational devices. Adding interpersonal, organizational, and/or small group communication study could be done with less fear of campus politics because those areas of study, as is the case with other liberal studies, were not designed as training for particular jobs. Reardon and Rogers indicate that the various areas of communication study sacrificed integration in the development of the discipline "in favor of what may have been a premature need for identity" (Reardon and Rogers, p. 289). These efforts to create separate identities have hardly found rousing success, and have cost the communication discipline an overall identity. The result of failing to integrate is seen clearly now in the politics of academia, with separate academic departments, separate associations, and separate scholarly journals (Blanchard and Christ, p.36).

This awkward fragmentation between mass communication and speech communication is now clearly damaging the discipline, as a number of scholars are explaining (Blanchard and Christ, p. 35; "State of the field," p. 2). The damage comes in the form of a poorly articulated sense of disciplinary identity and direction, which then leaves various communication-related departments at risk in the threatening political climate found at many universities today.

An academic rationale for communication study unification

The rationale for studying speech communication and mediated communication in the same academic arena can be stated in both philosophical and theoretical terms. Hudson's essay provides a clearly articulated statement of the fundamental objective of communication study, which applies to any context of communication.

> ...the emphasis on both the early Greek orators and the English natural rights empirical philosophers on the primary importance of teaching clear, accurate, responsible expression in the service of civic virtue is still the program, in its simplest form, of communication educators, whether in speech or journalism (Hudson, p. 10).

Bohn writes that the term "process" should provide the focus for all forms of communication study. He believes process can define the nature of the discipline, and ultimately drive courses and curricula.

> We must understand that the discipline is grounded in communication theory, in the basic process of communication as a relationship built around the exchange of information (Schramm), or more precisely, a process in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding... (Bohn, p. 16).

If one endorses Bohn's contention that "process" defines the nature of all communication study, taking the next step is easy in terms of identifying common conceptual ground for speech communication and the study of media. Within the overall process of communication are a number of basic concepts of essential interest to all communication scholars. These concepts would include, but are not limited to, channels, structure, symbols, feedback, credibility, listening, control mechanisms, and the

ethical implications of communication. All of these key concepts have application in all contexts of communication. And what is learned about credibility, for example, in one context, should be of academic value in studying credibility in other contexts as well. The concept of credibility, in fact, has been shown to feature the same components in various communication contexts (McCroskey and Young). It is also worth noting that these concepts have been rigorously analyzed and considered from the very beginnings of the communication discipline, first primarily through the study of public address and rhetoric, and then later integrated into developing regions of the discipline.

A number of other scholars have presented ideas that focus on the academic pursuit of merged communication understanding. Turow urges communication students to focus on understanding messages that are purposeful, whether the messages are linguistic or pictorial representations (Turow, p. 107). Moore underscores this point when he writes, "...the one unchanging element in the mix is the message..." (p. 170).

Yet another academic rationale comes from Glasser, who raises concerns about the "professional" way of knowing so frequently found in mass media departments. The focus on professionalism inhibits the discipline's quest for knowledge, Glasser argues, because it encourages "standardization" (p. 134). Professionalism then depersonalizes and controls the communicator by establishing accepted methods and decisions (see Glasser, and Soloski). Pushing practitioner skill, as frequently happens in mass media/journalism

departments, warps students' perceptions of knowledge in the field.

> "It is a synthetic knowledge that gets passed on from one generation to the next through custom and tradition, not through the formal processes we ordinarily associate with institutions of higher education" (Glasser, p. 138).

Thus, it would appear that bringing the process of media study into a closer relationship with the process of speech communication scholarship could be liberating for academics and their students, and maybe even, ultimately, media practitioners.

A number of scholars have already found key linkages of communication subdisciplines in their research. For example, Perse and Courtright have researched channel clusters (video, interpersonal, computer, audio) to identify which channels are rated most useful at filling various needs within uses and gratifications research (Perse and Courtright). Rubin and Rubin have proposed an interface of personal and mediated communication study. Research by A. Rubin has indicated, "People with different interpersonal needs...use personal and mediated channels differently," and that "...it seems clear that personal and media channels have interactive utility for need gratification" (A. Rubin, p. 11). Of course, many other examples can be found, from research about talk radio, to parasocial interactions through the media, to even rhetorical analyses of mediated messages.

A political rationale for communication study unification

Regardless of how academics feel about having to play campus politics, and regardless of how mass communication and speech

communication departments have viewed each other historically, there are common sense, practical reasons for why the study of the communication discipline should be brought under one umbrella. These reasons have to do with how the discipline is academically viewed on campus, and how best to protect communication departments from budget and administrative assaults.

Campus turf wars between various subdisciplines of communication expose the discipline as a whole to charges of not fitting in with other traditional liberal arts studies. In fact, many mass communication and journalism programs have asked to have their status in the academy scrutinized by seeking ACEJMC accreditation. Such accreditation operates under an internal assumption that the study of journalism and mass communication is outside the realm of the liberal arts. That awkward assumption, in part, lead the University of Wisconsin journalism and mass communication program to not renew its ACEJMC accreditation. Drechsel wrote that the ACEJMC accreditation approach furthers the discipline's problem with "insularity."

> "...until this field believes in itself, believes that it stands among the other liberal arts and sciences as an equal, it plays no small role in relegating itself to second-class citizenship in the academic world" (Drechsel, p. 68).

Dennis' remarks to a recent symposium make it clear that both speech communication and mass communication programs have been the targets for massive cuts or elimination by university administrators across the country ("State of the field," p. 2). Communication academics must not wait for such administrative

assaults before defining their centrality in the academy and looking for a unified and intellectual basis for restructuring. The discussion can be framed along the lines of argument previously presented in this essay. Such a proactive approach allows all communication related faculty to wrestle with the difficult philosophical and logistical challenges from a position of planned change. Program merging need not be a fearful process and there is sufficient academic evidence elsewhere to provide hope for successfully combining programs. A recent study by Halperin-Royer reviewed the effectiveness of combined speech communication and theatre departments. (Keep in mind that theatre can also be viewed as a process of communication -- but that argument can be saved for another time.) The study concluded that combined speech/theatre departments benefitted from strength in numbers and "the opportunities for cross-fertilization between the fields" (Halperin-Royer). The study also found "a surprisingly small percentage" of responses with concerns about administrative issues such as dividing funds within the department, and having only one chair for both subdisciplines (Halperin-Royer). It is also noteworthy that many institutions (especially liberal arts universities?) have historically maintained communication's subdisciplines in merged departments. Examples include Augustana, Hope, Denison, Hanover, DePauw, Albion, and Mount Union.

Curriculum application to merged communication study

It is essential that speech communication/mass communication mergers not simply list the old courses separately under a new department heading. Of course, many courses will maintain their current identity within particular subdisciplines -- rhetorical theory, media criticism, organizational communication, public address, media production, small group communication, and so on. But to make the merger a true bringing together of concepts and understandings, some major curriculum adaptations will have to be articulated.

A key change of vision needs to come in the overall major program of each communication student. Various department majors or tracks have traditionally expected mass media students to take only mass media classes, and speech communication students to study only speech communication. In some especially fractured programs, speech communication students might specialize in either interpersonal or rhetorical communication alone, and mass communication students might specialize in public relations, television production, advertising, or some such. Such approaches clearly run counter to the process and conceptual foundations discussed earlier, and consequently create confusion for our own students as well as the rest of the campus community. But worse yet, such divided sequences, tracks, or majors do a disservice to what should be the primary objective of any communication study program -- educating students to be able to understand and perform in the future communication world.

Students interested in mass media need to understand the origins of communication study in the speech communication arena, particularly in rhetoric. A prospective broadcast journalist can learn a great deal about interviewing and perspective-taking in an interpersonal course. He or she can develop a greater understanding of media organizations or the team production approach through courses in organizational communication or small groups. Students interested in advertising or public relations can certainly benefit from coursework in persuasion, argumentation, or rhetoric. Students of rhetoric and debate must surely become aware of how those processes are impacted by the mass media. These are just a few of the many examples for how understanding in one communication context can enhance understanding in other contexts. (Also see Blanchard and Christ, pp. 90-92.)

Departments will not be able, however, to simply assume that these linkages will be clear to students or anyone else in the university -- not after years of saying one part of communication study is here and another part is there. Curriculum planners will have to carefully articulate this intellectual merger for students through foundation and capstone courses. For example, instead of having a whole barrage of intro courses for each subdiscipline -- intro to public speaking, intro to mass media, intro to theatre, etc. -- a foundation course, perhaps called "Introduction to Communication Arts and Sciences," can be used to provide students with those fundamental concepts and processes that are essential in every context of communication. It would be an ideal place to

identify the roots of communication study and highlight commonalities as well as distinctions between various communication contexts. Communication students can then move on to study those contexts of particular interest with a more complete awareness of communication as a broad discipline, and with and appreciation for its interconnectedness.

A well structured major can ensure that these students become well-rounded communicators by requiring suitable major coursework in more than one context of communication. That, too, would be a signal to everyone that the department recognizes and appreciates the study of communication in its entirety. Students focusing on interpersonal communication would then be required to take at least some coursework in rhetoric and mass communication, and likewise for students emphasizing the other contexts of communication.

A fitting conclusion for a program of study in communication should, like the foundation course, bring students of varied communication emphases back together for a capstone seminar experience. This course would refine and rearticulate the fundamental nature of communication as a discipline. It could focus the study of communication on key issues of mutual concern to students of any context. Moore calls the capstone course "the curricular embodiment of convergence." He says it can draw the expected assessment outcomes for the university and the department together into one educational experience (Moore, p. 170). Capstone issues presented successfully at one institution have included communication ethics, communication in social movements, control,

gender and communication, and communication in the liberal arts. The capstone course should certainly allow for students with varying interests to research aspects of the issue they see as most useful, and with the variety of research methods found currently in the discipline.

Implementing a curriculum as defined above accomplishes several key objectives. It unifies the study of communication both in name and in curricular structure. It defines for the campus and the communication students a broad yet clear identity of communication study. Finally, a merged curriculum surely produces a more philosophically sound and practically useful communication major who will be best prepared for work or continued study in what is definitely now a merged communication world. Williams underscores this point when she calls for communication curricula that emphasize "aesthetic, interpersonal, and managerial theories and concepts, which allow students to meet the challenges in a changing communicator area" (Williams). Students should then understand the breadth of the field, be exposed to the various ways of knowing in communication, and benefit from both the theoretical traditions of speech communication and the more professional and applied heritage of mass media study. Blanchard and Christ recognize the significance of broad communication understanding and preparation.

> "For a communication program to see itself narrowly as delivering technically trained students to shrinking industries or theoretically trained students to shrinking graduate programs is shortsighted" (Blanchard and Christ, p. 35).

The time for reform is now

Reform in education is never easy. The logistical challenges of rewriting curricula, restructuring budgets, and maybe even renovating buildings or moving furniture will be substantial. Faculty staffing issues will also surface, most likely as opposition from many current mass communication programs where faculty might have more practical background, and thus feel awkward (threatened?) in an umbrella communication studies department. Opposition could also come from the media industry, where current practitioners will likely fail to appreciate the revised theoretical climate, particularly if they sense the change as a threat to getting entry-level employees who have been taught only to replicate current industry practices (see Wicklein). But the speech communication/mass communication merger movement should forge ahead with confidence in the overall rationale. The key to success will be the discipline taking clear responsibility to state and defend the study of communication as central to any university and to society as a whole. Wartella suggests this effort is now underway, thanks in part to the recent symposium where participants "agreed to build on the common threads that unite us -- including the field's breadth and diversity" ("State of the field," p. 1). Surely a time will come when scholars will look back and wonder why it took so long for the communication discipline to unite around these common threads.

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